

Paso Robles welcomes its heroes home

By Lisa Norris
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IT started in March 2003 with a pitcher of beer purchased as a "random act of kindness" by a local resident for a group of soldiers eating at a Paso Robles restaurant. It came full-circle with the citizens of Paso Robles and surrounding communities welcoming home "their troops," the 1498th Transportation Company (Heavy Equipment Transportation) of the California Army National Guard, with a parade and another barbecue celebrating their safe return after a year in Iraq. Moved by the gratitude and respect showed to him and his family by the grateful soldiers, the resident related his story to an audience listening to Paso Robles radio station KPRL AM 1230.

His call ignited a groundswell of spontaneous community support, leading to the "Mother of All Barbeques" for the soldiers of the 1498th at Camp Roberts, where the unit was training for deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Hundreds of community members from the Paso Robles area and nearby surrounding communities raised thousands of dollars in cash and "in-kind" donations to throw a "farewell" barbecue for the soldiers and their families before the 1498th departed for Iraq in May 2003.

Many of those same citizens reached in to their pockets and purses again to make good on the pledge made by the mayor of Paso Robles at that barbecue to hold another celebration upon the return of what became "their troops." And they lined the main street of Paso Robles to cheer the returning soldiers as they marched into the town's square, filling the soldiers with renewed pride in their service and their country and even moving some of the now battle-hardened veterans to tears.

"It was very heartwarming and emotional to see the folks lining Spring Street and the park full of people. The 1498th is very grateful to the community of Paso Robles for their generous support," said 1st Sgt. James E. Norris.

Comprised of 266 soldiers from units throughout California under the leadership of Captain Matthew Hook and 1st Sgt. James E. Norris, the 1498th is a heavy equipment transportation company with the primary mission of moving large combat systems, including the M-1 "Abrams" main battle tank, quickly over long distances. The unit served a total of 18 months of total Army service, with 12 months "in-country" in Kuwait and Iraq, logging more than two million miles in hostile territories. A "typical" mission usually consisted of picking-up a load in Kuwait, delivering that load to Iraq, moving other equipment as needed within Iraq, before taking a load out of Iraq and returning to Kuwait.

While sustaining no fatalities, soldiers were involved in more than a dozen hostile attacks. Ten soldiers received the Purple Heart for combat wounds received, with an additional three soldiers receiving the Bronze Star Medal and four soldiers receiving the Army Commendation Medal with "V" device, signifying an award for valor, for their bravery under enemy fire.



Soldiers of the 1498th Transportation Company march down Spring Street during a parade that honored their return home from their mission in Iraq. The celebration also included a barbecue.



ROAD BUILDERS

The Guard's 145th Engineer Company is a completely mobile road paving unit, capable of deploying anywhere in the world to grade and pave roads, runways and other surfaces. The unit has worked for the past two years toward the goal of establishing the 150 ton-an-hour rock crushing, screening and washing plant at Camp Roberts. The first rocks were crushed on October 27, 2004.



Camp Roberts Fire Department is first on scene at a vehicle collision and fire on Highway 101, north of Camp Roberts.

Camp Roberts' "Community Ambassadors"

Other than soldiers, Camp Roberts' second most visible presence in the community is its fire department. Camp Roberts Fire responded to over 200 calls in the surrounding communities in 2003 as a participant in mutual aid agreements with San Luis Obispo County Fire and Monterey County Fire, according to Fire Chief W. "Sonny" Breland, nearly a third of all responses for the department that year.



A Camp Roberts firefighter monitors a fire in the "impact area" at Camp Roberts. The "impact area," which sometimes contains unexploded ammunition, is usually allowed to burn within containment zones, if it catches fire.